HE WASN'T BORN IN THE INN
Luke 2:1-7
December 11, 1977

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The year was 42 B.C. Julius Caesar was dead and rival factions had begun a fifteen year Civil War for control of the Empire. The Roman poet Virgil, in his Fourth Eclogue, announced that the savior of the world had arrived. Historians believe that Virgil was pointing to Octavius, Caesar's great nephew. In fact, after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra, Octavius returned to Rome in 29 B.C. as Emperor. He assumed the name Augustus Divi Filius, "son of the divine one", and began immediately to establish an era of peace and tranquility. In 9 B.C. he consecrated the great Augustan Altar of Peace and Pax Romana extended throughout the world. In that same year, 9 B.C., Virgil's prediction became imperial policy. The birthday of Augustus was proclaimed throughout the world as the birthday of the Divine Savior.

That was the political and theological climate in a remote corner of the empire called Judea. The savior had been born. His name was Augustus. The accounts of the birth of Jesus were written against that backdrop, for people who had already been told who the savior was. They were written, as well, by men who knew that the baby of Bethlehem grew up to become the Christ of the Cross and the Lord of Easter morning. The gentle story of the Bethlehem birth, then, becomes a brave affirmation by a community of people who were, in effect, verbalizing their dissent from imperial policy. "This is the savior," they were saying, "not Augustus - nor any Roman Emperor."

Let's look again at the way Luke the Evangelist tells it. The Inn Keeper in Bethlehem has become, by default, one of the most maligned men in History. His crime was that he sent a very pregnant young woman away from his Inn. He has been characterized as cold, heartless, mercenary. Much has been written and said about the Inn as metaphor for the human soul. There was no room for the Christ because the Inn was already full of sin, materialism, sensuality, etc., etc.: the possibilities are almost infinite.

I have come to believe, however, that this approach is essentially wrong and that it diverts our attention away from the point Luke is trying to make. In fact, I rather sympathize with the Inn Keeper. After all, how was he to know that this odd couple, this middle-aged man and very young woman already in labor, arriving without reservations in the middle of the night, had anything to do with the salvation of the world? I rather admire the fact that he didn't slam the door in their faces, but apparently was compassionate enough to offer the shelter of his stable for the night. In any event, even that is diversionary. Luke merely states that the baby was born, laid in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. I suggest to you that the author is making a statement about God, not the Innkeeper, nor mankind: that in the birth narrative he is describing a God who, more often than not, comes into history from the outside: a God who, more often than not, stands apart from human establishment: a God who reveals Himself with great subtlety in ways which are not very conspicuous or popular or socially acceptable. I suggest that there is very good news in the assertion that Jesus was not born in the Inn because God wanted it that way.

The story of human religion, sadly, moves in the opposite direction altogether. Religion tries to domesticate God. Religion attempts to make the Holy manageable, to control and use the Almighty. Thus it happened, in the history of religion, that Crusades have been fought, infidels slaughtered, heretics burned at the stake, and

in our day, slavery condoned, minorities oppressed and freedom restricted - in the name of God: not, let us understand, the God of the Bible, but a god thoroughly tamed, domesticated and used for the purposes of whatever group is doing the fighting, slaughtering, burning, oppressing or restricting.

We're not guilty of that: we're embarassed by it - ashamed of it. But the middle class, mainline Protestant Church has become very, very good at domesticating the Christ who was born outside by making the demands of discipleship more congruent, more socially acceptable. We've become expert at eluding our Lord's imperative to love and His abiding concern with the poor and outcast. We've tamed the Holy a bit ourselves. We've discovered how to translate - "pick up your cross and follow" into "please increase your pledge". And theologically, we find terribly appealing the Gospel of a salvation so simple and self-centered that it will get us into Heaven without having anything to do with other people, other classes, other nations. The theology of popular religion has become expert at trading the Majestic Lord of Creation in on the all-too-familiar "Man Upstairs"; the God and Father of the entire human race into a celestial grandfather whose power may be invoked at the free throw line.

At Christmas the enigma of God's own Son born outside the Inn ought to prompt some rather profound reflection about our religion, but somehow it never comes out that way. Ernie Campbell once said that an American Christmas seems to have been designed to avoid the very questions Jesus Christ came to raise. The birth isn't the whole story. Our culture opens the door and invites the Christ into the Inn with us and the Christian must exert considerable intellectual willpower to recall that God had Him born outside.

J.C.Salinger, in Catcher in the Rye,caught the whole idea brilliantly in an incident which I shall never forget. It is irreverent and crude and absolutely right. The hero, Holden Caulfield, had taken his girl friend to see the Christmas show at Radio City Music Hall. Everything was very polished, professional, colorful and big. And Holden reflects that old Jesus probably would be sick at the stomach if He could see it..."all those fancy costumes and all. The thing Jesus would've liked would be the guy that plays the kettledrum in the orchestra." (See Ernest Campbell, Locked in a Room With Open Doors, p.140).

And if that's a little rough for your taste take it from Professor Hans Kung in his monumental theology, On Being a Christian. He writes: "It is not historical criticism...which has emptied Christmas of meaning - but the trivialization of these things, reducing them to a romantic idyl, a cozy private affair, and on the other hand the secularization and ruthless commercialization. As if the 'holy infant so tender and mild'...were always smiling and had never cried in his very human misery... As if the lovely night of the newborn infant meant that we could ignore his work and fate...and as if the child in the crib did not already bear on his brow the mark of the cross." (On Being a Christian, p.452).

Now, the point of this is not to make you feel bad in the middle of your Christmas celebration, or even guilty. In fact, it is to get at the point where true joy, authentic honest-to-God joy, becomes a miraculous gift. It is to hold up, in the midst of this cultural fawning over a baby, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the incredible good news that God loves us enough to send His Son to be born, and to live, and to die, for us. It means adoring the Christ - not the Christ of Madison Avenue but the Christ of the New Testament: the Christ born outside the Inn because that is where God wanted Him born.

According to Luke, Jesus was an outsider at birth. And according to the New Testament He remained very much an outsider for the duration of His life. His friends were common people: He was constantly in trouble for associating with sinners: He was opposed every step of the way by devout and pious men: He was convicted by a proper religious tribunal and He was crucified on the city garbage dump. Christians must never forget that - particularly at Christmas.

The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard suggested that until we have been made uncomfortable by Christ we will not have taken Him seriously. And I am suggesting that an authentic Christmas observance - not simply a tepid bath in December sentimentality - will include the profound and personal acknowledgement that Jesus Christ is still an outsider.

It would seem to me that minimally, we who know the whole story, would be looking for God's activity in some unusual places: we who know that Christ was born in the stable will be looking outside the Inn of our comfortable establishments for His redeeming presence today. It would seem to me that Christians who know what happened in Bethlehem would be open to the idea that God still works redemptively, outside: that wherever people are consigned to the stables of life, Jesus Christ comes among them.

Our dilemma is that we are often, too often, cast in the role of the oppressors. For a decade or so the established institutions of middle-class American culture have been the whipping boy for all the injustice and cruelty and inhumanity in the world. We are free and not hungry, and healthy and well: and to the outsider we look, at times, very much like that crowd in the Inn. Half-baked Marxism blithely ignores the clearest fact of history: namely, that all establishments, particularly theirs, must struggle against the propensity toward tyranny and oppression. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people. The Baby of Bethlehem was born outside everybody's favorite inn - even comfortable, middle-class Americans'.

Let the Inn stand for the well organized, well lighted and happy structure of your life. Let the stable stand for the incomplete, the disorganized, dark and desperate part. Look for the Christ there. The Gospel of Christmas is that, that is where He will come. Let us look for this Christ at the very point where our needs as persons are so deep we aren't even comfortable acknowledging them. In fact, let's confess that one of our deepest needs is admitting that we have any. For we are very much a part of a culture which values strength and self-sufficiency: we admire most the self-made man: we strive for internal resources which will leave us needing no one. That, I would suggest, is where Jesus Christ is outside: that is where God wants to touch us with His love.

Regardless of our posturing everyone of us needs acceptance and love. And in our heart of hearts no one of us is ever sure he or she really has it nailed down and locked tight. Regardless of our station or position, every one of us desperately wants to know that we matter, that our living makes some sense, that there is some purpose and meaning to me. That is the point, I would suggest, where God wants to touch our lives with grace.

Everyone of us needs to reach out in love and acceptance to some other: each of us knows too well the battle with ego and pride which binds us to empty selfishness and prevents us from saying those blessed words: "I'm sorry: I love you very much: I forgive you: I need you." That is the point, well outside the polite perimeters of our lives, where God wants to touch us with the Gospel of Christmas.

In the preface to the Rose Tattoo, Tennessee Williams wrote a stinging paragraph: "Men pity and love each other more deeply than they permit themselves to know. The moment after the phone has been hung up, the hand reaches for a scratch pad and scrawls a notation: 'Funeral Tuesday at five, Church of the Holy Redeemer, don't forget flowers'. And the same hand is only a little shakier than usual as it reaches, some minutes later, for a highball glass that will pour a stupefaction over the kindled nerves. Fear and evasion are the two little beasts that chase each other's tail in the revolving wire cage of our nervous world. (See R.M. Brown, The Pseudonyms Of God, p.102).

All is not well in the establishment either. Each of us has needs and guilt and hurts which cry out to be healed. Each of us has fears we cannot bear to acknowledge. And the incredible goodness of Christmas is that God loves us - and meets our fears - and will heal our hurt and assures us that we are of value - precisely because His Son was not born in the Inn. The joy of Christmas may be authentic and rich and full precisely because Jesus didn't drop in on the cocktail party in the Inn, but was born outside, out back, where we shelter and hide our deepest needs, our true selves.

J.B. Phillips has said it eloquently:

> "We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago...We shall be celebrating no beautiful myth, no lovely piece of traditional folk-lore, but a solemn fact. God has been here - and will come again with the same silence and the same devastating humility into any human heart which is ready to receive him."
> (Good News, Thoughts on God and Man, p.163-4).

So, come Lord Jesus. Come as infant, tender and mild. But come also as Lord, strong to save. Come with healing love. Come where we need you most.

Amen.

Our Father, in the midst of the joyful noise of the blessed season, speak Your quiet, winsome word of love to each of us. Give us the wonder of a child, hearing the story as if for the first time.

Amen.